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"THE DILEMMA THAT STILL COUNTS": BASIC WRITING AT A POLITICAL CROSS-ROADS

ABSTRACT: *In light of current debates about basic writers and basic writing (like those in these pages and beyond), it seems abundantly clear that there is a need to assess our field's definition of basic writing and basic writers in order to articulate what we are, both to ourselves and to others outside the field. This article begins by reviewing definitions of basic writers and basic writing in research from the last twenty years, using this review to argue that basic writers are not defined only in terms of institutional convenience. It then offers future directions for basic writing research, suggesting that in order to learn more about writers who truly are "basic," we must return to studies of error informed by basic writing's rich traditions of cognitive and cultural research.*

It's beginning to seem abundantly clear that basic writing is facing what the historiographer Gene Wise called a "pivotal moment" in its status and development as a field. We are all "in" this moment, watching as the field works to decide what it has become, and what it should be in the future. This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the recent heated exchanges (in these pages and elsewhere) between Ira Shor, who argues that basic writing is "our apartheid" and should be abolished, and Karen Greenberg, who counters with the point that basic writing classes have long been the entrance point to higher education for countless of students who might be otherwise turned away at the gates of the academy. Although the intensity of the Shor/Greenberg debate has doubtless been fanned by recent events at CUNY, the discussion about the need for basic writing did not, of course, spring from whole cloth. In fact, it's an issue that's been bandied about by the field, in various shapes and forms, since the publication of *Errors and Expectations* (and probably before that).

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Recently, however, the questions at the center of this debate have become more urgent for a number of reasons. College and university budgets are shrinking; at the same time, campuses are under increased pressure to raise admissions standards and admit "better prepared" students. Concomitant with this pressure to increase admission standards are various responses to the most current version of the "literacy crisis" that has run throughout this century, none of which are conducive to the kinds of issues basic writing students bring to the classroom. In response to these pressures, we are confronted with pressing questions about the nature of basic writing programs, students, and teaching practices.

When the Conference on Basic Writing held its first pre-conference workshop before the 1996 CCCC, these questions were at the forefront of many of the session's discussions. When the day ended, those of us in attendance decided that, as an "official body" of basic writing instructors, we needed to formulate a response to the issues that were facing us. But as we talked, we realized that it was difficult for us to pull together a sense of where we had been, and where we were going. Essentially, we needed to know how the field had defined and shaped itself as it developed, and how it responded to challenges about its future direction. Thus, this essay was born—an attempt to survey how basic writing has been defined in composition in the last twenty years. As we have worked on this project, political battles around the country have continued to develop, lending a greater sense of urgency to our feeling that we need to first examine our history before charting our future direction.

As we see it, this review is only a necessary first step; this reading serves as a guide for present and future action. Ultimately, we will contest the claim that basic writing programs owe their existence only to institutional or political impulses, or that basic writing exists, as David Bartholomae says, "only because basic writing teachers exist"; and that "the division [between non-basic writers and basic writers] makes nothing but institutional sense" ("Tidy House" 19). In fact, we will argue that basic writing programs serve compelling educational and political functions, and that one active response to the current political crises around basic writing should be a renewed and refocused effort to examine what we see as the one factor identified by writers from all parts of the basic writing literature as a marker of those writers: error. However, we make this argument judiciously and in ways that blend the best of the scholarship conducted in the field to the current time. But before we put forth what should be, it's important to examine what has come before.

If We Know Who We Think We Are, Why Do We Need a Definition?

In 1993, David Bartholomae argued that basic writing teachers "have constructed a course to teach and enact a rhetoric of exclusion and made it the center of a curriculum designed to hide or erase cultural difference, all the while carving out and preserving an 'area' in English within which we can do our work" ("Tidy House" 18). More recently, Ira Shor argued that basic writing programs are based in malignant economic and political roots: they exist, he says, to "help secure the status quo against democratic change in school and society . . . to discipline students in an undisciplined age" (92). Shor's argument extends Bartholomae's critique to include a much larger social and political universe, looking beyond the university for the forces that are shaping developmental writing programs. Although these two critiques emerge from very different theoretical traditions, both lead in the same direction: the conclusion that basic writing programs are set up to serve broad cultural goals (whether those be institutional, for Bartholomae, or economic and social, for Shor). And while Bartholomae, in his conclusion, stops short of recommending the abolition of basic writing programs, both critiques do lead to at least the serious consideration of that step. Shor's peroration challenges us to radically reconceive first-year writing instruction:

> Farewell to educational apartheid; farewell to tests, programs and classes supporting inequality; farewell to the triumphant Harvard legacy now everywhere in place, constantly troubled, widely vulnerable, waiting for change. (101)

If basic writing programs are not set up to serve students in real ways, why have them?

In the context of the larger field of composition studies, this question is timely, and its emergence can be traced along with the questions raised about mandatory first-year composition requirements (for a review of the abolitionist debate, see Connors). Questions about the legitimacy of basic writing, however, occupy a different place in public discourse. While increasing calls for accountability and outcomes assessment mean that audiences within and without the university are influencing the assessment of first-year writing programs, budget pressures and state legislature debates are actually abolishing basic writing programs. Anyone who reads both the *Journal of Basic Writing* and the *New York Times* has had the unexpected experience of seeing critiques of the CUNY basic writing program mounted by both a radical theorist and a Republican mayor, strange bedfellows indeed. While

the abolitionist debate over mandatory composition requirements is a theoretical debate with clear practical consequences, the debate over basic writing programs is carried out in public policy forums, not just academic ones.

The vitriolic nature of both public and academic debates about basic writing is linked to our field's failure to educate others about what we do. As Harvey Wiener, notes, basic writing programs, despite their successes, have not been "marketed" well by those who run them. Wiener contends:

> Perhaps we cannot prevent the unenlightened barbs of politicians with an eye on budgets or reelections, but certainly we ought to have educated our University colleagues systematically and thoughtfully about what we do. Yet we have failed here, and, as a result, we continue to suffer uninformed comments and criticisms by the professorate beyond (and unfortunately sometimes within) our English and writing skills departments. (97)

Wiener calls for programmatic assessment that will "link the specifics of instructional programming with data that would support its long-term future and fundability" (99). We agree that institutional assessment can provide information invaluable in political debates as well as program planning (for more discussion on this point, see also Collins).

Another response to the political crisis surrounding basic writing, however, is to return to the intellectual foundations of our field, to examine the myriad ways in which the category of "basic writer" has been established. What definitions of basic writing have become institutionalized? We began this project by searching for a common definition of either "basic writing" or "basic writer." A cursory review of the literature revealed, however, that such an undertaking was going to be either far more complicated, or far more simple, than we envisioned when we started. In some respects, it seemed easy to say that basic writers are students in basic writing courses, and each of us can imagine those students fairly easily. They are, after all, the students we teach on a regular basis. This simplicity of vision leads to the easy use of the term "basic writing" in *The Journal of Basic Writing*, book and article titles, or the *CCCC Bibliography on Rhetoric and Composition*. Of course, as rhetoricians we know that the basic writers at IUPUI are different from the basic writers in University of Minnesota's General College, who are themselves different from the basic writers at the University of Michigan (where the basic writers in Dearborn are different from those in Ann Arbor). And we also know that within the same class, basic writers differ one from the other, with some being

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"more basic" than others. Even as we acknowledge the variety of basic writers, we find the term basic writer one that we can easily use in professional discourse, where it means something like "those students at my institution who need (a little bit) more help than most other students do to write successfully," or as Shaughnessy once wrote, "students who need extra work in writing" ("Some New" 103). Easy enough.

From another angle, however, defining "basic writer" becomes so complicated that it becomes virtually impossible to arrive at a definitive answer. A frequently-quoted passage in basic writing literature comes from the book that arguably launched the field, *Errors and Expectations*. In the opening chapter, Mina Shaughnessy noted: "The term BW student is an abstraction that can easily get in the way of teaching. Not all BW students have the same problems; not all students with the same problems have them for the same reasons" (40). Shaughnessy continued:

> There are styles to being wrong. This is, perversely, where the individuality of inexperienced writers tends to show up, rather than in the genuine semantic, syntactic, and conceptual options that are available to the experienced writer. It becomes important, then, to do more than list, prescriptively, the ways in which the student breaks with the conventional code of punctuation. Rather, the teacher must try to decipher the individual students' code, examine samples of his writing as a scientist might, searching for patterns or explanations, listening to what the student says about punctuation, and creating situations in the classroom that encourage students to talk openly about what they don't understand. One of the great values of the decentralized classroom where students participate as teachers as well as learners is that it opens up the students' 'secret' files of misinformation, confusion, humor, and linguistic insight to an extent that is not often possible in the traditional setting. However committed teachers are to starting from 'scratch,' they have difficulty deciding where 'scratch' is without this kind of help from their students. (40)

This passage illustrates the complexity involved in teaching "the individuality of inexperienced writers." Although Shaughnessy is here concerned with punctuation, her remarks about the need to read students' work carefully, in as rich a context as possible, in a setting where students' voices join with teachers' voices in problem-solving carry over to virtually any element of writing. Basic writing students have always been difficult to characterize with any clarity, and the very act of categorizing is dangerous. Shaughnessy's warning that the term

"BW Student" can interfere with teaching is, ironically, the same argument Bartholomae made in "Tidy House": the label, the institutionalization, the tracking implicit in the construction of basic writing can prevent us from seeing students as individuals with their own needs. Any definition of basic writing or basic writers can only be essentializing and reductionist, so perhaps our efforts should be directed at eradicating the term, rather than defining it. Given the diversity of institutions and students in this country, there is a lot of sense in this approach — and that explains why this passage from Shaughnessy is so appealing (and oft-quoted). It is commonly used by writers wanting to acknowledge diversity before plunging into a more particular discussion of their own notion of basic writing (e. g. Reagan; Sheridan-Rabideau and Brossell).

Yet, a decision to avoid defining basic writers seems unsatisfactory. We continue to work in "basic writing" and to teach "basic writers" in an educational environment in which basic writing and remedial programs are under attack. The very public criticisms of CUNY, for instance, revolve in large part around the existence of "remedial" courses.[1] New York City is not the only place where basic writing courses have come under legislative scrutiny. As state legislatures become more concerned with curricular matters, the pressure to abolish such courses outright, or to refuse college credit for them, will only grow. (An interesting pair of essays in the February 1996 CCC discussed these volatile issues in South Carolina [Grego and Thompson] and New York [Soliday].) In such a political climate, we can't afford to abandon the students who have historically been served by basic writing programs. Our internal debates about the nature of basic writing are exciting, but political exigencies challenge us to formulate a clear statement of purpose. Without forgetting the diversity of students currently enrolled in basic writing classes, we should be able to define basic writing in keeping with current theory and in awareness of the political climate. It is time to confront the years of debate about the nature of our field.

Defining Basic Writers

Our first step in this direction was a literature review. Realizing that the literature lacks any clarity on broad definitions of basic writers, we shifted focus to examine what is at stake in the myriad definitions of basic writing. How does existing research define basic writing? What about basic writers? What do the authors say are the implications of their definitions?

As we read, two broad categories emerged which allowed us to describe some basic trends in the field: studies focusing on the pro-

cesses of student writers in action, which we refer to as research grounded in cognitive perspectives; and those examining the relationships between students' literacy cultures and their work in the classroom, which we see stemming from cultural perspectives.[2]

Cognitive Issues in Basic Writing

Generally speaking, cognitively-based explorations of basic writers focus on the writers themselves and what happens in the act of composing. In shedding light on students' composing practices, such research directly addresses teachers' questions about how best to help students who struggle while writing. Much of the early research on basic writing, such as *Errors and Expectations*, for instance, illustrates how close reading of student work reveals the logic inherent in "mistakes," and how such readings can drive instruction (a tradition that continued in later studies such as Bartholomae's "Error"). Another impetus for such scholarship was, and continues to be, characterizations of basic writers as stupid illiterates. Min-Zhan Lu's discussion of the reaction against open admissions at CUNY in the 1970s demonstrates the mean-spirited nature of these attacks: CUNY students, she reports, were referred to as "dunces," "misfits" and even "sluggish . . . animals" (891).

In cognitive terms, basic writers are sometimes defined in ways that allow researchers to explore what individuals do as they write. In a sense, this is Shaughnessy's scientific examination of student text in action. When the unit of analysis is an individual student — as in Sally Barr Reagan's study of Javier, in "Warning: Basic Writers at Risk," we learn a great deal about what influences writers. Sondra Perl's "Basic Writers in the Process of Composing" closely examines the writing processes of five basic writers. Her findings amplify Shaughnessy's, in that she suggests that the basic writers studied "display[ed] consistent composing processes" (22), but that their writing was more "fluent" when they wrote about subjects which were more familiar and comfortable for them. Ultimately, she uses these results to argue that writing should be less constrictive and more experiential (31-32). Similarly, in "This Wooden Shack Place," Glynda Hull and Mike Rose explore Robert's "unconventional reading" of a poem. In focussing largely on the processes Robert uses as he reads, looking at the particular experiences he has had that lead him to imagine the poem's images in ways that are surprising, yet logical, they provide a compassionate reading of a student essay that many teachers might be tempted to dismiss. Careful study of individual students reminds us how complicated even the simplest text is.

Cognitive research like Hull and Rose's stands squarely in oppo-

sition to the notion that basic writers are remedial students (see, for example, Rose's distancing from this term in "Remedial Writing Courses"). It demonstrates that basic writers are *writers*, with complex mental processes at work. Although cognitive research fights deficit models of education, it tends to assume that the study of individuals is the key to understanding students' needs, and in its most extreme form, looks only to the study of individuals for the root of writing problems. For example, Norbert Elliot begins his discussion of the importance of narrative for basic writers:

> Basic writers have only themselves. They are the method. There is no projected self on paper, no repertoire of discourse strategies to which successes and failures may be attributed. In basic writing courses, students hurl themselves into the void, expecting to receive the benefits that literacy brings. To the basic writer, everything is personal; they try to capture their lives on the page. (19)

Most characterizations of basic writers are not quite as isolating as Elliot's view, but much scholarship explores the ways in which *individuals* learn and use language.

The relationship between oral and written language, for instance, is one area that has been explored as an explanation for students' problems. De Beaugrande and Olson's tripartite view of basic writing as a linguistic, psychological, and social phenomenon argues that a reconsideration of the relationship between writing and speech would lead to richer basic writing classrooms. The *JBW* itself, in its call for papers, suggests that basic writers are "sometimes . . . student[s] from a highly oral tradition with little experience in writing academic discourse . . .". The inappropriate transfer of oral strategies to written tasks, some claim, leads to poor-quality texts. Basic writing students make erroneous links between writing and speech, in that they view writing as simply "cleaned up speech," and consequently focus only on sentence-level issues (Parisi). Basic writers are not likely to see gains in planning, focusing or revising, what Parisi says are "real strides" (34).

Another line of research posits that some type of cognitive deficit contributes to poor writing ability. Sheridan-Rabideau and Brosell suggest that basic writers have "trouble starting a piece of writing expressing ideas clearly, and revising" (22), although they note that "it would be dangerous to lump all basic writing students into one category" (22). Patrick Slattery's discussion of the role of developmental models in writing instruction provides a brief overview of the conflicting research on this point. In two essays, Janice Hays argues that basic writers are dogmatic individuals who function on the lower end of Perry's developmental framework; her findings are disputed by others (see

Slattery for a full discussion). Slattery, however, concludes that developmental models are somewhat useful, but not all-predictive. His work moves towards a mediated position on a continuum between cognitive and cultural scholarship, for he concludes that cognitive development is but one of a set of factors that contributes to writing success. Further research on those other factors would lead to a fuller view of the rhetorical situations facing students.

A third dimension of cognitive research is psychological. Do basic writers have psychological deficits? Although de Beaugrande and Olson urge that "it is . . . essential to uncouple the issue of psychological development from linguistic development," (11) there is a long tradition of study into such matters, with particular focus on anxiety and self-esteem among basic writers. Peter Dow Adams, for instance, notes that the "confidence and ... motivation [of basic writers at his institution] may be extremely shaky" (27; see also Faigley, Witte, and Daly, qtd. in Minot and Gamble 119; Lunsford). But no characterization of basic writers is without contradiction elsewhere in the literature: Minot and Gamble found that basic writers had no different images of selves as writers from students in first year writing—in fact, one section of basic writers in their study had higher pre- and post-test scores than any of the sections of first-year composition.

The final dimension of cognitive research is language itself. Many basic writing studies take students' written language as the main unit of analysis, exploring the errors students make, or other dimensions of students' grammar or syntax, although this is a strand of research that has fallen out of favor as more cultural approaches to basic writing have gained ascendancy. Shaughnessy's work, in both *Errors and Expectations* and her review of basic writing literature ("Basic Writing") focuses great, and thoughtful, attention on surface-level issues. We must note, however, that while Shaughnessy's primary focus was assessment and instruction relating to students' texts, she was aware of the tensions between surface issues and other dimension of writing (see her memo described in Horner ("Discoursing" 209)). Often, cognitive researchers employ metaphors in order to make sense (perhaps to themselves, and certainly to others) of the process by which basic writers they observed engaged with academic writing. For example, in "Some New Approaches," Shaughnessy refers to a "kind of carpentry in sentence making, various ways of joining or hooking up modifying units to the base sentence" (109). Purves uses similarly tactile metaphors—likening writing to cooking ("Don't Write Good" 16-17) and woodworking ("Clothing the Emperor" 33-36).

These metaphors are a good way to demonstrate the ways in which research we have begun by classifying as cognitive blurs with research we classify as more grounded in cultural traditions. Much scholarship, of course, takes elements from each to explore the ways in

which individual writers are affected by social context. For example, Hull et al.'s "Remediation as Social Construct" still focuses on language issues, but examines why it's so difficult for teachers to get out of a mindset that promotes a simple view of remediation. Purves' crafting metaphors call attention to the ways in which writing develops through joining language elements, a process which is physical, mental, and social; these metaphors also demonstrate that writing ability is no more about only sentence-level features than a gourmet meal is about the individual ingredients.

Purves, in fact, notes that language problems are linked to social problems; basic writers, he says, did not receive the right preparation in their prior schooling and have "not been fully clued into the academic writing game" ("Don't Write Good" 16). In a more theoretical vein, he notes: "It seems to me plain as a pikestaff that if we want to help others become members of our scribal society, the best way to do so is to teach them the rules of the game" ("Emperor's New Clothes" 36). Purves argues that because literacy occurs in a social framework, we must work at it from both ends, helping students understand both the social forces that construct literacy as well as the very particular rules that govern particular literacy acts. Even David Bartholomae's "Tidy House" essay, which has become a mainstay of basic writing research from a cultural perspective, contains some discussion and linguistic analysis of several of the student essays Bartholomae uses to ground the paper's theoretical discussion.

Cultural Issues in Basic Writing

As the need to theorize basic writing scholarship has become stronger, however, cultural approaches have moved to the forefront of the field. This approach to defining basic writing focuses less on individuals than on a sense of institutional or social culture, and instead stems from the rise of "discourse community" scholarship focusing on the connections between academic writing and the broader culture of the university. While research based in cognitive work is often in the form of the case study (of writers or individual classrooms, for example), scholarship grounded in cultural theories is often largely theoretical, invoking individual students only rarely or as authors of texts to be analyzed . Here, basic writing is a place that exists only in relation to the rest of the university. The task of a basic writer is to negotiate the movement into the university.

Spatial metaphors abound in this scholarship, as basic writing is viewed as a real or metaphorical journey into a new undertaking, academic discourse. Mina Shaughnessy's "Diving In," while concerned more with the movement of basic writing instructors (than basic writ-

ing students) into this territory exemplifies this journey. Shaughnessy describes four stages – Guarding the Tower, Converting the Natives, Sounding the Depths, and finally Diving In – to describe the journey that instructors must take to successfully work with basic writers. The teacher who "dives in," Shaughnessy writes, must immerse herself in the culture of the writer. [S]he "must make a decision that demands professional courage – the decision to remediate himself, to become a student of new disciplines and of his students themselves in order to perceive both their difficulties and their incipient excellence" (239). Elsewhere, Shaughnessy claimed that basic writing was "the frontier of the profession" ("Basic Writing" 206). Pamela Gay's post-colonial analysis of the frontier metaphor challenges us to explore the politics of frontier teaching, arguing that "we must learn to use difference as a source of strength" (34) and avoid reductive dichotomies between home and school culture, or between frontiers and civilization. The ways in which academic cultures have been studied have become increasingly theoretically and politically sophisticated.

Within the last fifteen years, David Bartholomae's work has come to embody the cultural approach to basic writing research, where the undertaking of basic writing is an institutionally constructed artifact of exclusion. "Inventing the University" is perhaps the classic example of this argument. As Bartholomae argues there, as well as "The Tidy House," basic writing is defined primarily by what it is not: it is not "regular" composition courses, and its students are not "regular" writers. While Bartholomae's position is no doubt familiar to most readers of this essay, we shall quickly sketch it out. He argues that the key issue for students is learning a new discourse. A new student

> has to invent the university by assembling and mimicking its language while finding some compromise between idiosyncrasy, a personal history, on the one hand, and the requirements or convention, the history of a discipline, on the other. He must learn to speak our language. Or he must dare to speak it or to carry off the bluff, since speaking and writing will most certainly be required long before this skill is 'learned,' and understandably, this causes problems. ("Inventing the University" 135)

Hindman, elaborating on Bartholomae's argument, goes so far as to claim that the institution has invented basic writers: "basic writers are beings for us as professors of English; the notion of marginal students as 'marginal'. . . is essential to the functioning of our own system; our own autonomy and place are dependent upon someone else's dependence on our authority to assign or deny location" (60). Hindman's argument anticipates Shor's "Apartheid" argument, which

takes the university and locates it in a regressive social and economic structure Shor would work to change.

While in some ways this cultural argument is reminiscent of the cognitive arguments that students need to learn to write in ways that are acceptable to the academy, Bartholomae's point is that the discourse of the university is itself invented. As Gail Stygall argues in "Resisting Privilege," "the institutional practice of basic writing is constructed and inscribed by the notion of [Foucault's] author function, and . . . the teaching of basic writing is formulated around the educational discursive practices necessary to keep the author function dominant" (321). Because basic writers are by definition not accorded author status, Stygall explains, they are not permitted to break conventions, they are not permitted to make great developmental strides (plagiarism is suspected), they are not read as rational writers, and they cannot express a poly-sided version of the self (324-35). Institutional categorizations of basic writers lead to teachers' compressed expectations of basic writers, which in turn limit the rhetorical choices available to students. Writers' roles are restricted by the ways in which the university constructs them.

While Stygall attributes basic writers' difficulties to the ways in which the institution limits their performance, Patricia Bizzell suggests that the difficulties are rooted in the acculturation processes of students themselves. The problem may be that some students have "such limited experience outside their native discourse communities that they are unaware that there is such a thing as a discourse community with conventions to be mastered. What is underdeveloped is their knowledge both of the ways experience is constituted and interpreted in the academic discourse community and of the fact that all discourse communities constitute and interpret experience" (qtd. in Bartholomae, "Inventing" 147). In Bizzell's model, teachers need both to introduce the academic discourse community and to introduce the very notion of discourse community; writing classes should help students explore the social and communal nature of the language communities they come from.

The notion of discourse communities plays easily into the figure of the contact zone, a metaphor popularized by Mary Louise Pratt. Pratt argues that contact zones "are places where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery or their aftermaths as they are lived out in the world today" (34). As Harris notes, Pratt's ideas "have held strong appeal for many teachers of basic writing, perhaps since our classrooms seem so often a point of contact for various and competing languages and perspectives" (31); in fact, Pratt's work is alluded to in cultural scholarship as often as Shaughnessy's work is alluded to in cognitive scholarship. The contact zone takes the gap

between academic discourse and basic writers' preparation and makes it an advantage, a teaching moment, rather than a deficit. In the contact zone, basic writing becomes an acculturation medium. In the contact zone, basic writers are the "other," those who do not fit in with the mainstream expectations. In the contact zone, that "otherness" becomes an asset, a cultural quality that promotes an enhanced understanding of the discourse rules that govern the university. As Bartholomae imagines it, in the contact zone, "one could argue that 'basic writers' are better prepared to produce and think through unseemly comparisons better than their counterparts in the 'mainstream' class" ("Tidy House" 14).

Whether the university is theorized as a contact zone (Bartholomae), a frontier (Shaughnessy), a post-colonial encounter (Gay), a game (Purves, "Don't Write Good"), or a club (Rose, *Lives*), the conceptual problem that has evolved from the increasing dominance of cultural approaches to basic writing is evident in the Shor/Greenberg debates: a focus on academic culture leads to the elision of basic writers. If the basic writing course becomes an opportunity to become conversant with college discourse, then every student entering college is a basic writer. Peter Dow Adams notes that that shifting pedagogies now mean that what we do in basic writing classrooms is really not so different from what we do in first-year composition classrooms (24). In fact, the textbook that has emerged from the basic writing program at the University of Pittsburgh, *Ways of Reading* (Bartholomae and Petrosky), is used in basic writing courses, first-year composition courses, and even advanced composition courses. In fact, some of the scholarship on basic writing is not really about basic writing anymore, in that the research seems equally applicable to any writing classroom (a point Bloom uses to argue for renaming *JBW*; see "Name"). Marcia Dickson, for instance, uses the term novice writer, rather than basic writer, in her study of the basic writing sequence at Ohio State, Marion. Many other articles that have appeared in *JBW*, such as Lee Odell's "Basic Writing in Context," are more critiques of teaching of literacy and reading in college generally than analyses of issues particular to basic writing.

When everyone is a basic writer, then "real" basic writers can get lost in the crowd (a point raised by Karen Greenberg repeatedly whenever mainstreaming is proposed; see Greenberg, "Politics" and "Response"). In a heated exchange on two listservs last fall, a debate between Shor and Greenberg turned on this very point: if we provide critical writing instruction for all students, won't some students' great needs not be met? The cultural arguments for basic writing blur very smoothly into more mainstream composition theory—which is good for the prestige of basic writing scholarship, but bad for a separate definition for basic writing programs. The more we aim to show that

the basic writing programs are not purely remedial or "bonehead" English, the more we run the risk of doing away with basic writing through our own theories. Not all writers in this tradition would go this far; Bartholomae, for example, explicitly refuses: "Would I advocate the elimination of courses titled 'basic writing ' for all postsecondary curricula beginning next fall? No. I fear what would happen to the students who are protected, served in its name" ("Tidy House" 20). But the pages of this journal saw Shor's well-theorized call to abolish basic writing programs, evidence that what is at stake for these programs, as well as for basic writers, is great indeed.

Future Directions: What We Need to Know

Given what we see in the diversity of basic writing scholarship in the last twenty years, we are faced with an important question: where do we go? We began this project with an attempt to define basic writers in a rich yet satisfying manner. Perhaps unsurprisingly, our reading and analysis has not allowed us to frame a simple definition that will settle the heated disputes now raging in hallways and legislatures. But precisely because this is such a difficult question, it is all the more important that we address it now. It seems clear that our collective failure to explore the real political consequences between the broad cultural approaches to basic writing and the cognitive approaches leaves us, our programs, and most importantly our students, vulnerable to legislatively-mandated cuts. Within composition, generally, difficult questions are being asked about the position of basic writing and basic writers in the academy. Within the broader political culture, other questions – potentially, more troubling ones – are being asked about the "worthiness" of the very students who frequently populate basic writing courses. Yet, as we suggested at the beginning of this article, we want to argue against the notion that basic writing and basic writers have been defined only in terms of their "otherness," or as an institutional convenience. There *are* answers to be had to some of the questions being fired at the field right now: What about the ways that these writers compose makes them basic writers? What about the relationships between their literacies and institutional values makes them basic writers?

As much cognitive and cultural research from the last twenty years demonstrates, basic writers are real people who bring with them real issues to the classroom. They are not defined by what they are *not* – instead, they share a common characteristic that cuts across institutions and courses: there are more errors in their writing than there are in the writing of "non-basic" writers. While the dangers facing basic writers are articulated differently in cognitive and culturally-based

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scholarship, error is the one common danger cutting across the research in the field. Sentence-level errors are far and away the most likely dimension of writing that will mark basic writers (and they are the most likely dimension of writing to elicit phone calls to writing program administrators). While most writers and readers would agree that there are other dimensions of writing that are more important, such as focus, purpose, or rhetorical context, it is error that stigmatizes in a way that weaknesses in those other dimensions do not. Accordingly, cognitively-based work looks at error at the sentence level; culturally-based work tends to look at errors of form and convention, more broadly. But even the conclusion to *Facts, Artifacts and Counterfacts* acknowledges that basic writers "will continue to make more mistakes than their mainstream counterparts" (qtd. in Hindman 58). As *Errors and Expectations* demonstrated so beautifully, student errors can be what marks them as basic writers, but errors can also be the keys to understanding students' needs.

Yet, what do we know about error? While the packed rooms at recent CCCC sessions on grammar suggest a renewed interest in that subject, error analysis is not a trendy subject in research these days. As Hull's 1985 literature review observed,

> researchers who study error study it differently now. This shift in what constitutes interesting and valued research on error, what might be called a shift in paradigms, has occurred as part of a broadening of our notions of what constitutes acceptable scientific research . . . . It also reflects a movement away from a concern solely for correctness in writing and toward an interest in rhetoric . . . . And it reflects, finally, new attitudes toward the role of error in language learning. (177)

As attention has shifted from a close focus on correctness to more rhetorical views of error, research attention has shifted away from error analysis towards generic conventions and other rhetorical matters. And while we fully support a move away from mindless correctness to a rhetorical integration of language and form, we contend that the move away from an oversimplified view of correctness has led to a reduction of interest in language use.

That said, there are a number of recent studies that bear on this point. Robert Connors and Andrea Lunsford's research showed us what were the 20 most common errors in the sample they examined, and Rei Noguchi's work demonstrates strategies for teaching grammatical revision. The social dimensions of error have long been acknowledged; that is, error results not simply from a violation of a rule, but from a violation of a rule as perceived within the writer/reader relationship or within a discourse community more generally. Joseph

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Williams' "Phenomenology of Error" argues that error must be viewed according to "the nature of our response to violations of grammatical rules" (159). In other words, error is not simply a matter of whether a "rule" has been violated or observed, but whether a reader has *noticed* that the rule has been violated or observed. But there has been little work done to explore the ways in which social views of error are taught, or learned. How do students view such work?

Research of the last twenty years also tells us that when those violations are noticed, the writers who produced them are judged harshly. Despite our theoretical advances, outside writing programs, writing is commonly viewed as a matter of skills that can be easily taught, and easily learned. The structure of American high school curricula promotes this view about language and writing in general, as the tendency to include grammar instruction in discrete, handbook-driven units illustrates. In most other skill-based areas, we expect a learning curve. As Alan Purves notes,

> having trouble writing is like having trouble playing the piano, cooking, or doing carpentry or plumbing. The problem with writing as opposed to those others is that people in institutions of higher education expect students to do it reasonably well. After all, most of the faculty and administrators are pretty good at it (or so they think) and they are genuinely surprised to find a student who has trouble with syntax, organization, diction, or tone, much less finding something to say about a supposedly controversial topic that few really care about. ("Don't Write Good" 15-16)

Many teachers outside writing programs are so surprised by error that they may reject the authors of error-ridden texts. And for basic writers, whose texts are frequently marked by error, this fact of academic life can be particularly devastating because it can be one of the most significant factors in determining their educational success (or lack thereof). As Hull notes, the "dilemma that still counts for many inexperienced writers in college classrooms is error. We can choose to make it count less by continued scholarship on the processes of mind that govern error commission and correction" (188). But for basic writing students, error often counts more. As Michael Newman notes, drawing on Shaughnessy's work:

> basic writers often become obsessed with error, sometimes to the point of believing that the entire object of writing is to do so correctly. Then, like a dancer who at all times worries about the position of their feet and so destroys the dance, they be-

come so focused on words and syntax that their writing col
lapses into conceptual incoherence and communicative vacu-
ousness. (25)

Of course, an obsession with error does not necessarily lead to
correctness in writing (much less the development of other aspects of
a text). Students have notorious difficulty recognizing and correcting
error (interestingly, some research suggests that teachers do as well;
see Greenbaum and Taylor). Very few studies examine the process of
error analysis, although many note that students' perception of errors
is very different from teachers'. Horner, for example, notes that when
he asks students to revise errors, "Their 'corrections' often leave un-
touched the errors I have in mind and alter what I fail to see as origi-
nally in error" ("Rethinking" 175). Horner outlines a pedagogy for
teaching error as negotiation between readers and writers, but does
not look at the work of individual writers as he does so. While we
know something about which errors occur; we know very little about
what students do as they revise to correct error. George Otte's "Com-
puter Adjusted Errors and Expectations" suggests that error recogni-
tion is a much more difficult process than we usually suggest (and
provides one of the few studies of writers at work in this dimension of
writing). As we explore the perceptions of basic writers, we need to
explore their writing processes in both broad formal terms and also
sentence-level terms.

Despite Hull's conclusion, which outlined a broad research
agenda, the study of error has not advanced much in succeeding years.
Much work remains to be done with the concept of error, theoretically
and practically. Within this large category, questions abound. What
are some of the causes of error? That is, drawing from the work of our
cognitive predecessors, what decisions are basic writers making about
their writing (specifically the sentence formations of their texts) that
lead them to construct them as they do? Adding a cultural element,
why are these writers making those decisions as they are - what are
the beliefs and values (about academic writing or, perhaps, writing
more generally) that are informing those decisions? Conversely, what
are the effects of these errors? How do writers perceive them after
they are "noticed" (or marked), and how does that perception affect
writers' concepts of themselves as writers and students?

A second area that requires more investigation involves students
themselves. Few works, with the exception of Deborah Mutnick's
Writing in an Alien World , explore how basic writers see themselves in
any broad way. As Purves notes, our labels, such as "basic writer," are
"given by the judges, not the judged" ("Emperor's New Clothes" 46).
What do basic writers have to say about themselves? How do they

perceive their abilities and experiences with reading and writing (and those things in conjunction with one another)? Do they agree that "error" is the feature that marks them as basic writers, or do they perceive other issues with their writing? Alternatively, do they contest the label that has been attached to them all together? What do they see as the differences between the "standards" against which they have been assessed, and their own perception of their writing and reading skills?

And finally, we echo Wiener's and Shor's calls for programmatic assessment. Without information about the effects of basic writing programs, we are unable to argue effectively for funding and other resources. Without sharing information about assessment techniques, we are unable to learn from each other. Writing program administrators should begin collecting information and sharing perspectives on how such information can be used, both internally and externally.

In addition, as individual scholars, we can use our research to further programmatic ends. Renewed attention to error will help us to better define and understand what basic writing is, who basic writers are, how we can talk about writers' needs among ourselves, and how we can represent basic writers and talk about their needs with public officials. The avenues of research outlined above should make it clear we are not advocating a return to a drill-and-skill pedagogy that divorces language from context or process. The social view of error advocated by Horner and Williams has much to offer basic writing scholarship, for it provides a way to unite broad cultural concerns and specific language concerns. The danger here, of course, is that treating error as a cultural construct once again begins to blur distinctions between groups of writers. Basic writers cannot be separated from more advanced or more proficient writers on the basis of error alone, if every writer is always in the process of negotiating. But here is where further research will enable us to make better distinctions. What kinds of errors are regarded as most severe? By which groups of readers? In what contexts?

A better understanding of what kinds of errors most contribute to the stigmatization faced by basic writers will inform a richer curriculum and more personalized writing instruction. As we explore the ways in which error is constructed by readers in the academy, we must also explore the ways in which basic writers define themselves as writers, to bring student voices into our discourse. At this critical juncture in the history of basic writing, we owe it to ourselves, and our students, to strategize about how our research agendas can further our stance in political debates.

Notes

1. Generally speaking, we reject the term *remedial* because of its pejorative associations and the limited view of writing development it promotes. We use it here because it is the prominent term in the public debate over basic writing and other developmental programs. Margot Adler's March 25, 1997 *Morning Edition* report on CUNY, for instance, used the term repeatedly ("CU of NY").

2. Of course, we do not mean to suggest that all writing research fits neatly into these categories; we have created them only as a springboard for the analysis of the definitions of writers in existing scholarship.

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